Confusion in Tension

By Cdr. Yancy B. Lindsey

The end of a long day of fleet carrier qualifications (CQ) was near, and I only needed one more night trap. We had the gas and time, so things were looking up. The CQ had been conducted in-and-around numerous flight-deck-certification flights, which, if you've ever experienced them, are long and grueling ordeals. To make matters worse, it's extremely easy for noncertifying aircraft to interfere with certifying aircraft. This situation leads to long delays for fleet pilots waiting to fit in traps here and there.

As I taxied onto cat 2, for what would be my final pass of the night, all I could think about was getting around the pattern, finishing up, and heading to the wardroom for some well-deserved mid-rats. We got into tension, and everything looked good. I turned on my external lights to signal the catapult officer we were ready to launch.

But, my final launch of the night was not to be. A suspend signal from one of the squadron's troubleshooters was followed shortly by the catapult safety petty officer stepping in front of the aircraft and waving the throttle-back signal. Next came a radio call from the Air Boss in the tower, without any amplifying information, telling us our troubleshooter had called us down. We folded our wings and taxied back to our parking spot. Once the plane was chocked and chained, our flight-

deck coordinator came into the aircraft. He said we were downed because our starboard-wingtip light was burned out. A wingtip light? That's why we were suspended and sidelined just one trap short of being CQ complete? I couldn't believe it. How could a burned out wingtip light down an aircraft?

With not enough time remaining in the CQ period to change the light and still finish, we shut down the aircraft and headed to mid-rats. I didn't give the incident any more thought and moved on to other more pressing matters.

I'd forgotten about that incident until about four months later, during a critical phase of COMPTUEX. I was standing a squadron watch in the carrier's air operations, with a critical night-mission flight in tension on the catapult. As I watched on ship's TV, I could tell something wasn't quite right. It took forever to shoot the aircraft. Then I realized why: The catapult safety observer was stepping in front of the aircraft, giving the throttle-back signal. The Air Boss came on the radio and asked the crew if they were up or down. The crew's response, "I guess we're down."

They spun off the catapult and taxied to a parking spot. As their aircraft was chocked and chained, I asked them about their downing discrepancy. Their response, "A burned out wingtip light."

I couldn't believe it—not again. This time, I needed to know why we were interrupting an inherently dangerous evolution for a burned out light.

I did a little research. I talked to my maintenance control, to the LSOs, and other pilots. I also read my aircraft's NATOPS, CV NATOPS, LSO NATOPS, and OPNAVINST 3710.7T. Nowhere could I find conclusive proof that a wingtip light was required for carrier flight operations, or that it was a downing discrepancy for my T/M/S of aircraft. It's true, the LSO's preference would be to have both wingtip lights operable. These lights allow them to determine the orientation of the aircraft's wings at night during landing. However, one operable wingtip light and the indexer lights in the aircraft's nose would provide a similar means to determine wing orientation.

The more I talked to folks about these incidents, the more I realized there are other discrepancies or situations that can cause a troubleshooter to down an aircraft when, in reality, the aircraft is safely flyable and should be allowed to launch. Naval aviation is dangerous enough without eliminating all known discrepancies and confusion from complex evolutions, such as a carrier launch. The last place you want to be out of sync with your troubleshooters is in tension, on a catapult, at night. At that point, everyone involved in the launch, aircrew and ground crew, needs to understand the process, sequence of events, standard signals, and downing discrepancies. Suspending a catapult shot is a high-risk evolution, which is mitigated through standardization and training. Inconsistency and confusion must be removed to the greatest extent possible. I had an initial opportunity to remove that confusion and failed to do so. Fortunately, I was given a second chance.

Here's your chance. Have your pilots and NFOs discussed the launch evolution with your troubleshooters? Are you all on the same page with regard to downing discrepancies and when an aircraft should suspend and not suspend? If not, you need to have that discussion. My general rule (and I believe it's a good one) is, if there's a doubt, there is no doubt; suspend the launch. The discussion I propose will help to remove some of that doubt and carve another piece of risk off of an inherently dangerous evolution.

Cdr. Lindsey is the executive officer of VAW-117.

Standardizing the criteria for suspending a catapult launch would eliminate confusion and reduce risks. As we went to press, VAW-117 was working to resolve this problem.—Ed.